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ABSTRACT

The decline of public confidence in education can be traced in part to the declining percentage of adults with school-age children. Since nonparents derive their information about schools primarily from the mass media, schools must expand their information networks beyond their immediate school community and devise public relations programs to let taxpayers know the value of education to the life of the community. In this respect, educators and the legal community should become partners in efforts to clarify school board policies and regulations, anticipate the educational ramifications of emergent legislation and court litigation, and improve the public image of both professions. (TE)

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Role of Public Relations in Preventive School Law

PAUL D. KEMP

Paul D. Kemp, administrative assistant to the Superintendent, Office of School/Community Relations, is celebrating his 16th year in education. As head of the Office of School/Community Relations, he is in charge of all community relations for the school district. He supervises the community education adult education and volunteer services departments, as well as serving as Public Information Officer. Dr. Kemp received his doctorate in School Administration from Nova University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

The eyes of the nation are now focused on education. In addition to the Commission on Excellence's report, "Nation at Risk," there are twenty-four other major reports either already published, or will be soon. Most of them point out areas of concern and offer remediation suggestions. We acknowledge that we do have problems and we need all the assistance we can get. Let's look at some of the concerns we must face in education today.

Declining public school enrollments, diminishing number of public school parents and steadily increasing numbers of adults with no school age children combine to become "partly responsible for a decreasing public confidence in education," according to education pollster Ned S. Hubbell of the Michigan State Board of Education.

Hubbell's report of trends in citizens' attitudes toward education in the decade of the 70s are the result of more than 100 opinion polls conducted by his own former Michigan-based polling firm for school districts throughout the nation.

Demographic data in each of ten successive Gallup polls support Hubbell's findings. Ten years ago, 44 percent of the adults in this country had children in public schools. In 1980, the U.S. Census showed only 28 percent were public school parents and better than two out of three adults had no children of school age.

By 1990, the U.S. Census Bureau projects the number of people age 55 and over will be larger than the entire K-12 school population. And, if present trends continue, one out of every five Americans will be at least 55 by the turn of the century.

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Unfortunately, as this phenomenon has developed, educators, by-and-large, have failed to see the importance of expanding their information networks beyond a dwindling circle of parents and friends.

As educators, we resent the implications of reports, like "Nation at Risk," that imply that we have allowed academics to slide. Perhaps we've had different goals such as access for all students in the last decade. We agree that we need now to refocus or prioritize academics. But, remember, it was only about a decade ago that James Meredith was trying to gain access in the University of Mississippi. A friend of mine was a high school principal in the northwest during that same era. A couple came to enroll a handicapped child in my friends' building. They were told the school was very sorry but they did not have a suitable facility or program for an impaired child. Look where we are today!

For non-parents, the mass media continue to be the primary source, with word-of-mouth from other people moving into second place this year. The other three major sources of information for non-parents are someone's children, school district publications, and teachers and other school employees.

The news media, which, as Hubbell shows, more and more of our publics are depending on for information about schools, carry information about these topics critically or not at all. But, if you look closely at this coverage, you will find they do so more often from lack of information from school administrators than from lack of space or interest from readers.

Schools must become pro-active, devise marketing plans and public relations programs if they are to survive.

Until fairly recently, schools shunned the idea of PR; it was tied too closely to business, competition, profits. We didn't need to sell ourselves. But realistically, today with 70-75 percent of our community no longer having children in public schools, we must let the taxpayers know what is going on, and value of education to the life of the community.

Citizens have become disgruntled and somewhat dissatisfied with bureaucracy, big government, taxes. They don't feel they carry much weight at the national level or even the state. But they can go to the polls in their local schools and vote against a mill election.

We must sell our constituency:

- (a) Education is better than ever!
- (b) Better educated young people make a better community for all of us.
- (c) Someone paid the bills when we attended a school.

- (d) Education is not just kindergarten thru 12th grade—but life-long, and we can help!
- (e) Public education is the backbone of democracy.
- (f) We must be “partners” we-schools-community-you, to survive!

What does all of this have to do with the legal type? We, too, must be partners. A better informed, involved, linked community will have fewer legal problems. There are many ways you can assist as a partner:

1. Be sure your school board has clear, concise board policies to administer their schools.
2. Are the administration's regulations on how policies will be administered, clear?
3. Are policies cross-referenced with school law?
4. Last, but certainly not least, as a partner, provide detailed in-service for school staffs. Don't wait until the school administration calls you with a problem, be proactive. When a law is passed, when a court case is settled and there are legal ramifications—tell the schools about it. Let them know before they face the issue.

A recent article in *Urban Magazine* spoke of volunteers aiding cities. One example was an attorney who took time from his San Francisco law firm to try misdemeanor cases for the district attorney. Schools need you, too! Get involved!

We have a common problem in Public Relations, getting the story of what we do to the public, becoming more credible. Media, as information service, doesn't do much for image of attorneys or image of educators. The 1982 Gallup Poll placed constituents' confidence as: (1) Medicine—45%, Scientific community—38%, and Educational community—33%. These lead: organized religion, military, Supreme Court, banks and credit unions, major companies, Ronald Reagan & Co., news media, Congress, organized labor, advertising, and lawyers.

You are problem solvers, trained to be critical thinkers. What would you think if I called three or four and asked you to help me think through a problem? We are like the ghetto—we have our own language—our way of doing things. We often think of ourselves as the experts but we don't know much about you. Your jargon—your way of doing things.

We are only experts in education—you are experts in law. We could learn from each other.